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ON PAGE 26

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
9 October 1981

The Qadhafi Problem

"If Libya had been taken care of two years ago, last year, this year, Sadat would probably be alive today."

Henry Kissinger's words in the wake of President Sadat's assassination take on an added poignancy because the role of the United States was to stop Sadat from taking care of Libya. The persistent report has been the U.S. twice blocked Egyptian plans to invade Libya. The report that it happened at least once has now been attributed directly to President Carter by New York Times correspondent Leslie Gelb, who ought to know since he was himself a high official in the Carter State Department. In short, the United States restrained—effectively blocked—its ally from doing what he thought necessary to his own self-defense.

No such restraint was placed on Col. Muammar Qadhafi, the Soviet-backed madman who runs Libya. The Soviets have stuffed Qadhafi's Libya with several times the military equipment his army could possibly employ, and provided Russian pilots for his planes and East German bodyguards for his personal security. This has left him free to send assassination squads after Sadat, fund terrorism around the world, invade and conquer Chad, go on to attack the Sudan, shoot at American planes over the Mediterranean and—according to intelligence reports recently circulated within the U.S. government—issue specific assassination threats against President Reagan.

Now Sadat lies dead while Qadhafi continues to attack his neighbors. How can you escape the conclusion? As Mr. Kissinger put it, "It's too dangerous to be associated with the United States—that is the fundamental problem." Or as a Saudi Arabian official told our Karen Elliott House, "Being America's friend in the Middle East is fatal."

Now, we are quite aware that no direct link has been established between Qadhafi and President Sadat's assassins. The conventional wisdom, indeed, seems to be instantly accepting the Egyptian Defense Minister's preposterously premature denial of any such connection. We view his statement as the start of a familiar cycle that precludes serious investigation of international terrorism.

The notion of an outside connection is first denied for what are essentially domestic political reasons—to calm the nation, to smooth the transition, to proclaim the loyalty of the army, to defend the competency of internal security forces and so on. Then the tacit

job of the investigators becomes confirming political reality. Then the bureaucracy acquires a vested interest in this confirmation, and spends its time inventing defenses of it and demanding impossible levels of proof whenever doubts are raised. Thus we have learned little about the international travels of the Pope's assassin, and are likely to learn nothing definitive about Sadat's assassins.

Yet as we understand what Mr. Kissinger was saying, it makes little difference who actually pulled the trigger. If Qadhafi had been overthrown, the whole pattern of events would have been dramatically altered. President Sadat would have been stronger with his own people. And the forces of terror and assassination would be everywhere less confident and weaker. Mr. Kissinger pointed out that Qadhafi runs a nation of only two million people, and observed that if we "cannot find a way to get such a rogue criminal under control, then we're living in a world in which all restraints have disappeared."

The difficulty is that this particular rogue enjoys the support and protection of the Soviet Union. Under the umbrella of nuclear deadlock, the Soviets have made huge strides through subversion and war by proxy. Despite the denials it becomes increasingly apparent that they have cultivated terrorism to destabilize our friends; the quarter of a billion dollars worth of weapons confiscated from terrorists in Turkey did not come from disaffected Armenians. We have been unable to compete in this kind of warfare, particularly since our decimation of the CIA. Worse, we have acquired a record of destabilizing our friends—sanctioning a coup against Diem in South Vietnam, hectoring the shah about human rights in Iran, stopping Sadat's invasion. It seems the only way to survive as an American ally is to be willing, like Menachem Begin, to bear American opprobrium for acting in your own interest.

To defend its own interests—and the causes of freedom and human rights—against this kind of warfare, the U.S. has to learn how to strike back. We have to think seriously again about covert action in support of coups, about military force to aid the Sudan, about guarantees against Soviet retaliation if Egypt decides to move against Libya. If we cannot find a way to deal with the Qadhafi problem, Western interests and Western values are likely to suffer the death of a thousand cuts.